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PLAYWRIGHTS ON PLAYWRITING

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

WE have no right to expect that a creator of art should be also a critic of art. He is a creator because he can create, because he can paint a picture, model a statue, tell a story in action on the stage or delineate character in narrative; and he needs only enough of the critical faculty to enable him to achieve the obligatory self-criticism, without which he may go astray. If he is a born story-teller, for instance, he may tell stories by native gift, almost without taking thought as to how he does it; and even if he does it very well, he may be an artist in spite of himself, so to speak. He may achieve his effects without analyzing his processes, —perhaps without understanding them or even perceiving them. His methods are intuitive rather than rational; they are personal to him; and he cannot impart them to others.

He may, in fact, misconceive his own effort and see himself in a false light, sincerely believing that he is doing his work in one way when he is really doing it in another. Zola, for one, was entirely at fault in the opinion he held about his own novels; he was so uncritical that he supposed himself to be a Realist, avid of facts, whereas he was unmistakably a Romanticist planning epic edifices symmetrical and fantastic, and forcing the facts he diligently sought for to fit as best they could into the structure of the dream-dwelling he was building. Zola was a tireless worker, dowered with constructive imagination, but he was not more intelligent than the average man; and he was distinctly deficient in critical insight as was swiftly disclosed when he ventured to discuss the principles of novel-writing and the practices of his fellow-craftsmen.

But there are artists, and not a few, who are keenly intelligent and who are able to philosophize about their calling; and whenever they are moved to talk about the technic of their several arts we shall do well to listen that we may

learn. We can make our profit from what Horace and Wordsworth have to say about poetry and from what Pope and Poe have to say about versification. We can gain enlightenment from the remarks of Reynolds and Fromentin and Lafarge on painting and from the remarks of Fielding and Scott, Howells and Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson about fiction. We must, of course, make our allowances in each case for the personal equation and for the predilection the artist-critic is likely to possess for the special school of art to which he himself belongs,—and also for the forgivable intolerance he sometimes reveals toward those who are attached to other schools.

When the artist who is also a critic addresses the public, he has his eyes directed, more often than not, particularly to his fellow practitioners. Thus it is that he tends to deal more especially with technic and to talk about the processes of the craft and about the best method of achieving needed effects. Nor is this to be deplored, since we need all the information we can get about technic to enable us to appreciate his accomplishment,—and who can supply this information so satisfactorily as the artist himself? There may be other points of view than the artist's; there is that of the public, for one; but the artist's must ever be the most significant; and what it is we can learn only from him. He at least has practised what he is preaching; and this fact gives a certain validity to his discourse.

It is a misfortune for a critic when he has lacked opportunity to get intimate with the art he has undertaken to analyze; and in default of this intimacy he can hardly help developing into a mere theorist, borrowing from the theorists who had preceded him along the misleading path, and who, like him, had been forced to grope in vacant darkness. When Horace in his time, Sidney in his and Castelvetro and Minturno in theirs, essay to lay down laws for the drama we discover at once that they have no knowledge of any actual theater, that they are totally devoid of that intimacy with the stage which sustained and nourished the criticism of Aristotle and of Lessing. There was no living drama in Rome when Horace wrote about the playwright's art; there was no living drama in Italy when Castelvetro and Minturno and the rest of the supersubtle Italian critics were proffering themselves as pedagogues for all intending playwrights; and in England when Sidney

defended poetry the drama was just about to be born. So far as we know neither Horace nor Sidney, Castelvetro nor Minturno, ever had occasion to see a good play well acted before an audience ready to respond to its emotional and intellectual appeal.

Even in this twentieth century there are critics not a few who persist in dealing with the drama as literature only, deliberately ignoring its necessary connection with the theater, with the playhouse where only it discloses its full power, with the players who represent it, and with the playgoers for whose high pleasure it exists. This is a wilful error, which vitiates only too many estimates of the masters of tragedy and comedy, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Molière. Perhaps the best corrective is a consideration of the utterances of the dramatists who have discussed the principles of playmaking. Here we may find light, even if it is sometimes accompanied by more or less heat.

The list of the dramatists who have been tempted to talk about the drama as an art is long,—far longer indeed than is suspected by those who have never sought to seek them out. It includes Lope de Vega, Ben Jonson and Dryden, Corneille and Molière, Goethe, Lessing and Grillparzer, Voltaire and Goldoni, Victor Hugo and the two Dumas, Ernest Legouvé and Jules Lemaitre, Bronson Howard and William Gillette, Arthur Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. These are all the names of professional playwrights whose dramas, comic and tragic, survived the ordeal by fire in the theater. Yet it may be well to point out that they divide themselves into two groups, putting into the first those who were critics by profession and whose reputation is due rather to their critical acumen than to their playmaking skill, Ben Jonson and Dryden, Lessing and Jules Lemaitre, and setting apart those who were critics only on occasion, their fame being based on their plays—Lope de Vega, Corneille and Molière, Grillparzer and Pinero, to name only a few. It is from these latter that we have a right to expect the most significant statements.

II

The first thing we discover when we compare the opinions of the professional playwrights is that they agree in accepting the judgment of the audience as decisive and

final. As their plays were composed for the delight of the spectators, they all feel that they are bound to accept the verdict rendered in the theater. They know better than any one else how vain is the hope of an appeal to any other tribunal. They were seeking success on the stage, not in the study; they desired to arouse and retain the interest of their own contemporaries in their own country. They gave no thought to posterity or to foreign nations. They recognized that they had no right to complain if they could not win over the jury by which they had chosen to be tried. In so far as the dramatists have expressed their opinion on this point they are unanimous.

In Professor William Lyon Phelps' lively little book, *The Twentieth Century Theater,* he has told us about an unnamed author, who "profoundly influenced not only the stage but also modern thought" and who nevertheless maintained that the "true dramatist must not think of the box office while he is writing his plays. He must express himself, which is the only reason for writing at all. If what he writes happens to be financially successful, so much the better. But he must not think of popular success while at work." We cannot doubt the sincerity of these sentiments, since Professor Phelps frankly informs us that the majority of this author's pieces "have been failures on the stage."

The practice of this unnamed author is in sharp opposition to that of Shakespeare and Molière, who were shrewd men of business, both of them and who had each of them, a keen eye to the main chance. Shakespeare was susceptible to every veering shift in popular taste, giving the public sex-plays, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well,* when other playwrights had stimulated the taste for that type of piece, and following in the footsteps of Beaumont and Fletcher after these collaborators had won the favor of playgoers with their more or less spectacular dramatic-romances. Molière made haste to bolster the bill with a robust farce when the box-office receipts revealed to him that the *Misanthrope* was not financially successful. Goethe displayed his customary insight when he told Eckermann that the greatest of English dramatists and the greatest of French dramatists, "wished, above all things, to make money by their theaters."

This wish of theirs did not interfere with the ability of

Shakespeare and of Molière "to express himself." Of course, the dramatic poet desires to express himself; but if he is a born playwright, he never thinks of trying to express himself except in conformity to the conditions of the dramatic art, with its triple dependence on the playhouse itself, the players and the playgoers. Professor Phelps's unnamed author may have "profoundly influenced" both the stage and modern thought, but he was not a born playwright or he would have ever had "popular success" in mind while he was at work. If he did not value the winning of the suffrages of his constituents, why did he present himself at the polls? There are abundant facilities for self-expression in the novel and in the lyric. In the drama self-expression must take thought of the public, of its likes and its dislikes, of its many-headedness and of the variety of its tastes.

The opinions enunciated by this unnamed author are contrary to the practice of Shakespeare and Molière, and they are also contrary to the precepts of Lope de Vega and Corneille, who also profoundly influenced the stage, and also influenced what in their own day was "modern thought." Lope de Vega paid lip-service to the Italian theorists of the theater, regretting only that the playwrights who worked according to their precepts died "without fame and guerdon." Then he tells us (with his tongue in his cheek) that "when I have to write a play I lock in the precepts with six keys . . . and I write in accordance with that art which they devised who aspired to the applause of the crowd, for since the crowd pays for the plays, it is fitting to talk foolishly to it to satisfy its taste." Less than a quarter of a century later Corneille said almost exactly the same thing, perhaps sadly but certainly not ironically: "Since we write plays to be performed, our first object is to please the court and the people, and to attract many to the performances. We must, if we can, obey the precepts, so as not to displease the learned and to receive unanimous applause; but above all we must win the vote of the people." And Molière less than thirty years later is equally plain-spoken: "I am willing to trust the decision of the multitude, and I hold it as difficult to combat a work which the public approves as to defend one which it condemns."

It may be noted that Corneille desired to gain, if pos-

sible, the good opinion of the learned, while he held it essential to gain that of the crowd. The younger Dumas once imagined his father replying to those who had asked him if he would not be satisfied if he had achieved the commendation of the best judges only: "No, the approbation of these judges would not amply indemnify me for the coldness of the others, because the drama, which appeals to the many, cannot be satisfied with the approval of the few." In putting this opinion into the mouth of the elder Dumas, his son was but expressing the belief of every successful playwright who has been moved to discuss the art of the drama; and it may be well to recall the fact that in their own day all the great dramatists were only successful playwrights, their popularity being beyond question even if their greatness was still in doubt.

III

There are other beliefs of the successful playwrights, perhaps not so unanimously expressed, yet widely held. One of them is that the playwright, like the poet, is born and not made. The younger Dumas declared that a man "may become a painter, a sculptor, even a musician, by study—but not a playwright. . . . It is a freak of nature, which has constructed the vision as to enable him to see things in a certain way." He added that this very rare faculty is revealed in the first attempt at play-writing, however unambitious this juvenile effort may be. Goethe had said almost the same thing, asserting that "writing for the stage is something peculiar. . . . It is a craft which one must understand and it requires a talent which one must possess." In other words, the playwright, like the poet again, must be born, and he must be made also, after he is born, since he needs to master the technic of the trade.

On another occasion Goethe spoke of the prolixity of Schiller's earlier pieces, a fault which Schiller was never quite able to overcome. Goethe commented that it "is more difficult than is imagined to control a subject properly, to keep it from overpowering one, and to concentrate one's attention on that alone which is absolutely essential." The younger Dumas, who always knew what he was driving at, declared that the first qualification of the accom-

plished dramatist was logic, which "must be implacable from beginning to end. . . . The playwright must unfailingly place before the spectator that part of the being or thing for or against which he wishes to draw a conclusion."

Sir Arthur Pinero agrees with Dumas in holding that "dramatic, like poetic, talent is born, not made; if it is to achieve success it must be developed into theatrical talent by hard study and generally by long practice. For theatrical talent consists in the power of making your characters, not only tell a story by means of dialogue, but tell it in such skilfully devised form and order as shall, within the limits of an ordinary theatrical representation, give rise to the greatest amount of that peculiar kind of emotional effect, the production of which is the one great function of the theater." This theatrical talent has to be exercised within the limits of the theater as this exists at the time when the dramatist lives. The principles of playmaking are eternal, no doubt, but the practices of playmaking are modified by the constantly changing conditions of the stage.

Pinero likens the art of the drama to the art of war, the permanent principles of playmaking to strategy, and its variable principles to tactics. Strategy is today what is was yesterday; and it was succinctly defined during our Civil War by General Forrest, when he said it consisted in "getting there first with the most men"—that is to say in gaining an advantageous position for yourself, and putting the enemy in a disadvantageous position. It is therefore unchanging in its essential elements, Joffre and Foch profitting by the example of Napoleon and Caesar, Hannibal and Alexander. But tactics are in incessant modification, as the soldier has new implements put in his hands by the inventions of the ages, gunpowder unhorsing the man in armor, and tanks taking the place of elephants. While the strategy of the drama is constant, its tactics "are always changing." So Pinero has put it; and "every dramatist whose ambition it is to produce live plays is absolutely bound to study carefully, and I may add respectfully—at any rate not contemptuously—the conditions that hold good for his own age and generation."

The strategy of Shakespeare is that of Sophocles, of Ibsen that of Molière, even if the later men did not recognize

their own obedience to the laws which had governed the earlier. The tactics of Sophocles were diametrically opposed to those of Shakespeare, because the Greek dramatist built his massive plays to conform to the conditions of the immense open air theater of Athens with its extraordinarily intelligent spectators, whereas the English dramatist had to adjust his pieces, comic and tragic, to the bare platform of the half-timbered London playhouse with its gallants seated on the stage and its rude and turbulent groundlings standing in the unroofed yard. So the tactics of Molière and Ibsen are strangely unlike, the French author fitting his comedies to a long, narrow theater, dimly lighted by candles, with the courtiers accommodated on benches just behind the curtain and with the well-to-do burghers of Paris making up the bulk of the audience, while the stern Scandinavian found his profit in the modern picture-frame stage, with its realistic sets and with its spectators comfortably seated in front of the curtain. Each of the four followed the tradition of his own time and place; and each in turn made the best of the theatrical conditions which confronted him. But however much they may differ in practice, in tactics, they worked in accord with the same principles, and employed the same strategy.

Bronson Howard admitted that Aeschylus "taught the future world the art of writing a play" but he "did not create the laws of dramatic construction. Those laws exist in the passions and sympathies of the human race." A little later in the same address, Bronson Howard declared that the laws of dramatic construction "bear about the same relation to human character and human sympathies as the laws of nature bear to the material universe." In other words, the drama is what it is, what it always has been, what it always will be, because human nature is what it is and was and will be. And this brings us back to the inexorable fact that the eternally dominating element in the theater is the audience. "The dramatist," so Bronson Howard reminded us, "must remember that his work cannot, like that of the novelist or the poet, pick out the hearts, here and there, that happen to be in sympathy with its subject. He appeals to a thousand hearts at the same moment; he has no choice in the matter; he must do this." That is to say the drama is immitigably "a function of the crowd," as Mr. Walkley has called it.

Finally, Bronson Howard pointed out that there was no great difficulty in obeying the laws of dramatic construction, even if it may be impossible to declare them with precision. "Be honest and sincere" in using "your common sense in the study of your own and other people's emotions. . . . The public will be your jury. That public often condescends to be trifled with by mere tricksters, but, believe me, it is only a condescension, and very contemptuous. In the long run, the public will judge you, and respect you, according to your artistic sincerity."

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